AN ORATION

BEFORE

The Re-Union Society

OF

VERMONT OFFICERS.

IN THE

REPRESENTATIVES' HALL, MONTPELIER, VT.,

NOVEMBER 7th, 1872,

BY COL. SAMUEL E. PINGREE,
HARTFORD, VT.

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POLANDS' STEAM PRINTING ESTABLISHMENT.
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MINUTES.

MONTPELIER, VERMONT, Nov. 7, 1872.

THE ninth annual meeting of the Vermont Officers' Re-union Society was held at the State House, at 10 o'clock, A. M.

After the transaction of the routine business it was, after considerable discussion, unanimously

Resolved, That non-commissioned officers be and hereby are invited to join this society under the same conditions as commissioned officers.

The question of the location of the next Re-union recurring, a ballot was taken and the Executive committee were instructed to call the same at Brattleboro, in October, 1873.

The Committee on nominations reported, and the Society elected the following officers for the year ensuing:

President,—Col. REDFIELD PROCTOR, Rutland.

Vice Presidents,—Gen. WM. W. HENRY, Burlington, Col. THOS. O. SEAVER, Proctorsville.

Treasurer,—Gen. P. P. PITKIN, Montpelier.

Recording Secretary,—Maj. JAMES S. PECK, Montpelier.

Corresponding Secretary,—Lt. JOHN C. STEARNS, Bradford.

Executive Committee,—Lt. KITTREDGE HASKINS, Brattleboro, Capt. RICHARD SMITH, Tunbridge, Capt. SAMUEL E. BURNHAM, Rutland.

The report of the Treasurer, showing a deficit of $11.39, was presented and ordered on file.

After the appointment of Gen. WM. W. HENRY as Marshal, the Society adjourned till evening, when its members marched to the State House to hear the address by Colonel SAMUEL E. PINGREE, of Hartford.

On motion, the thanks of the Society were tendered to Col. PINGREE for his able and interesting address, and a copy of the same was requested for publication.

Lieut. BENEDICT announced the death of Maj. Gen. GEORGE G. MEADE, and offered resolutions eulogistic of his character and services, which were unanimously adopted.

The Society proceeded to the Pavilion to discuss the good things prepared for it, and supper, toasts, speeches and reminiscences filled the time till the small hours, when it adjourned by singing Auld Lang Syne.

JAMES S. PECK, *Secretary.*

ORATION.

Mr. President, Comrades and Fellow Citizens:—To be summoned by your Executive Committee to the duty of addressing my comrades and fellow citizens upon the occasion of this, our ninth annual re-union, after these occasions have been honored by the eloquence of divines, and of statesmen, and of soldiers true and tried, bestirs in me, as it well might, a degree of embarrassment and solicitude, which, as on those occasions which we are here to commemorate, a candid sense and appreciation of duty alone must guide and sustain me through.

In the unrepublican governments of the older world, the discharge of the soldier from his profession may be considered his discharge from duty, but in the United States of America it is not so; with us the muster-out redevolves upon us those ennobling duties and responsibilities of the citizen, which our soldiership held only in a temporary abeyance.

One of these duties, and prominent among them for the fostering of those sacred virtues which guard with watchfulness and with wisdom the best interests of the State,—and which, at least while any of this generation shall remain, will contribute to their security—is the duty of keeping green and sacred in our hearts the memories of those of our comrades who died in war that we might live in peace; the

duty of keeping green and sacred in our hearts, the memories and the deeds of those who offered, as well as of those who made upon the altar of their country the noblest and holiest sacrifice that ever falls to the part of the brave to offer or to make—the sacrifice of life, that their country might continue to have a name and a place among the commonwealths of the earth.

This is one of the primary objects of our Association. In the fulfillment of this object, we impulsively recall with what measure of astonishment we listened to the early notes of the trumpet of war. The emotions which then thrilled our souls seem to come back to us again, though not with all their bewildering amazements, and the indefinite and undefinable forecasts from the starting point in the spring time of eighteen hundred and sixty-one, are now recollected as the school-day experiences of a people untaught in the science of arms.

To recall some of the incidents growing out of the deep labyrinth of mysteries, of fears, of hopes, and of that determined patriotism which moved the nation's heart on the threshold of that "impending conflict," and which called into being that great barrier to treason and the nation's ruin, I have chosen for the subject of my address to you to-night "The Army of the Potomac," purposing to refer only to some of the circumstances in which it had its origin, and to the period of its organization.

It was with the infant history of this army that many of us were early identified. It was through its great subsequent history that most of us shared its discipline, its struggles, its achievements, and its devotion to the nation. It was through its "days of labor, and nights devoid of ease," that that great company, who now swell the vast bivouac of

the nation's dead, were taken from our ranks, as offerings for the nation's purification.

We are now in the midst of a period of calm reflection, and can look back to the past from the stand-point of peaceful days.

When the eventful scenes of 1861 burst upon us, we were living under the government established by Washington. Men were then among us whose memory and whose history were in part entemporary with his. Under the benign opportunities and influences of that government, our civilization had pressed across the continent to the shores of the peaceful sea. Peaceful enterprise had knitted together the remote States and cities with an almost interminable net-work of highways, and post-roads, and railways, and telegraph lines. Peaceful enterprise had penetrated the inland lakes and the rivers with almost countless lines of water craft. Peaceful enterprise had filled up the wilderness with a teeming population of thirty millions of people, going forward with all the customary pursuits of civilized life. Peaceful enterprise had developed the mechanical arts and the manufactures, and the fine arts had been adorned. Peaceful enterprise had developed that genius which gave life to our commerce and brought it into successful rivalry with the maritime nations of the older world. Peaceful enterprise had given life to that skill and cunning which published and fashioned to the use of mankind the recondite agencies of steam power. Peaceful virtues had disseminated education among the masses, adorned the pursuits of sacred science, and so enlarged the missionary operations and successes as to invite the plaudits of the Christian world. Peaceful philanthrophy, under the fostering care of a government so gentle, had invited the oppressed of Europe to participate with us in these felicities. War seemed to be remembered no more,

while peace had contributed to the full, rounded measure of our greatness, attained within the memory of men who yet lived.

Guided as if with an Unseen Hand, our people had gone forward on a mission of prosperity, philanthropy, and felicity, unexampled in the world's history. Our ships of commerce were floating upon the oceans and in every sea, and the kings, and princes, and merchants of all lands did reverence and homage to our flag. How naturally were all our energies, our hopes, and our expectations turned into the gentle channels of these arts of peace. How foreign to our sentiments, how estranged from our interests, how unnatural to our intelligence, became the rude calculations of humanest war. Separated from all the entangling combinations of the older nations by the broad ocean, harmony, policy, humanity, and interest limited us to only a liberal and peaceful intercourse with them.

With such a *status*, and with the open pages of our fathers' history before us, the tender accents of their counsels still lingering in our memories, and seeing all around us the teeming fruits of their deeds of wisdom and of statesmanship—the offspring of a half century of almost undisturbed repose,—could we look forward to the possibility of the need of mighty armies to save our government from dismemberment and ruin?

That this republic, so singularly blest of heaven—this empire, so young, and yet so marvellous in its benificence to the human race—so wonderful in the grandeur of its resources, and so exalted in its relations with fellow States—that this republic must purchase her perpetuity by the marshaling of her sons in war's dread array, was a lesson which

her statesmen, her scholars, her people must be trained to learn amid experiment, peril, and confusion.

Without the sad, yet fruit-bearing lessons in the school of disaster, her peace-trained people would have poorly estimated the magnitude of the approaching storm. Without the sad yet fruitful lessons in the school of disaster, no sublime forecast of her sages could have organized results from combination. Oratory in her golden circles of expressive words yielded to the majesty of patriotism, but knew not how to direct it. Philosophy acknowledged its controlling might and was silent. Poetry only dared to twine her fairest laurels for its brow, while all human statesmanship and all human wisdom seemed inadequate to comprehend the magnitude of the task before us. Our president professed reliance on the better angels of peace. Our eminent state secretary prophetically assured us that three score days should bring us sunnier skies and a more cheerful atmosphere, while grave senators could hardly wait the in-gathering of the first faint levy of undisciplined troops to see the rebellion ended. The press took up the key-note of offensive action, and the public mind was beguiled into the contemplation of sounding peans of exultation over a prostrated rebellion.

Was there any difference between an unorganized body of troops moving on to attack an enemy of unknown force, intrenched in chosen position, and in standing on the defensive behind these intrenchments? Such calculations seemed to be held in contempt.

The venerable Scott, the great captain of his age, was consulted, and, rising in the majesty of his years, he shook his gray head in disapprobation of an advance, until the untrained legions were converted into soldiers. But

the impulse of the popular heart must be appeased by the venture, and the nation doomed to disappointment, for the possibility of defeat had been entertained by none. The President was as illy prepared to comprehend the realities of the hour, and as powerless of that genius which was necessary to meet them, as his cabinet, the statesman, the press, or the people.

Our long devotion at the shrine of Peace had committed our judgments against all the needed plans and preparations for a rebellion so gigantic, and the severe discipline of disaster must initiate the nation's effort to save the State. The startling shock of unsuccessful battle is needed to enlighten, to exalt, and to direct the irrepressible patriotism of a people so thoughtless of the magnitude of the nation's salvation.

Scott, remonstrating with the warning voice of his familiar science, nevertheless yields to the demands of the popular impatience—and the army of Gen. McDowell is moved from Arlington, on Manassas, with little of the circumstance and method of trained battalions, and returns with none.

Of the necessity of that brief, disastrous campaign for the disciplinary affliction of the nation's heart, I have spoken. Of the magnitude of the shock to the nation's sense, of the strangeness of the gloom which it overcast, of the disgrace to our arms, the demoralization, the route, the panic, it is sufficient, comrades, to say of them, we never had occasion to look upon the like again.

Yet disaster, route and panic though it was, and freighted with responsibilities to startle and arouse, nevertheless it left us with its rich heritage of instruction; it opened the public heart to a rectified sense of the powerlessness of misdirected patriotism; it warned the public mind that to

set upon the task before us without the preparatory discipline which all history dictates for a starting point, would result in failure. "Who," asks the historian, "will venture to measure the consequences of actions, by the apparent humiliation in which they have their origin?"

The mysterious influences of that Power which enchains the destinies of nations, over-ruling the mandates of sovereigns and the forethought of statesmen, often eliminate the greatest events from the least commanding causes. That over-ruling Providence, who had led the fathers amid the storms and in the sunshine, and through persecution to success, testing their patience, and fortifying their virtues amid sorrow and reverse, fitting them for the sacred responsibilities of self government—that Providence, through this dark disguise of our humility, was pointing out to us the grandeur of our duties, and directing us to the perfection of those great combinations essential to their performance.

As we look back now with the light of experience to direct our view, as we contemplate the trifling proportions which the peace-trained president, and statesman, and people accorded to a rebellion so stupendous, can we claim that almost any price of disaster was too great to secure to us the boon of instruction which the event inculcated?

Thus the early and ill-conceived preparations for the conflict vanished in a single spasm, and the government turned to the contemplation of graver responsibilities, and to a system of preparation commensurate, in some degree, to the vast proportions of the work before them.

Fixed and defined opinions and plans upon all subjects connected with the raising, the organizing, and the patient disciplining of great armies, and clearer views upon the

general conduct of vast military operations, were now revealed in the clear light of the nation's necessities.

The veteran lieutenant-general, with head crowned white with the frost of age, "bending under infirmities incurred in his country's service while carrying her flag over so many fields of victory," endows his comrades with the beacon lights of his experience and wisdom, and lays down his sword forever.

To what hands now, tried or untried, shall the great trust be committed—the great trust of moulding the character and shaping the future of the grand military and naval combinations and operations on which the national being now hung trembling in the balance against secession?

But yesterday the united nation was wanting in none of the resources of the first order of military scholars—to-day she might see the alumni of her academy, "with an ingratitude more strong than traitors' arms," arrayed against their *Alma Mater*.

Next to Scott, and now first in what remained of loyalty on the army roster, stood the name of the youthful, though not inexperienced soldier, McClellan.

Ripe in the perfection of the varied learning of the profession—though but just entered upon the threshold of middle life—he had added thereto the lessons of experience in the great campaign of victories under his predecessor from Vera Cruz to the Chapultepec, and with the allied armies of France and Britain from the Alma to Sevastopol; and as if to endear himself to the American heart with an almost inordinate confidence, he had planned and executed that series of brilliant victories in the Kanawha valley, which secured to West Virginia her state sovereignty, and a new star to the constellation of states.

"While a strange fatality seemed to attend upon the steps of all others," says a cotemporary, "in his department we had never lost a battle." The President and the people called him with one voice from beyond the mountains, to set upon the hazardous task of saving and securing the capital, and of creating from the ingathering masses of citizen soldiers an army which should go forth to battle the enemy, without the possibility of a repeated disaster to our arms.

Never in history did the common heart of a great people turn with a warmer impulse of affection or a more unbounded trust on any, than did the people of his country on General McClellan. And it was with the hand of a master that he entered upon his great undertaking. At no other period amid the manifold seasons of trial and perplexity, which continued to recur until our government had assumed the *status* of a war power—at no other period could the mantle of deeper trust, of weightier responsibility, or of more varied and embarrassing duty, have fallen upon the shoulders of any chief.

The resources of men—brave and devoted men—were gathering to the camps on the banks of the Potomac, but the vast *materiel* of an army was wanting, and its calculation was the work of genius and its procurement the work of time.

The ordering of camps of discipline and instruction, the daily drill and preparation, and whatever pertained to the evolution and regularity of great organizations, constituted the least considerable of the momentous responsibilities of the commander-in-chief

The ultimate mission of this army was not merely the defense of the national capital, but for the great impinging force, looking forward to the ultimate defeat and destruc-

tion of its counterpart, the great confederate army of Virginia. That objective point once attained and the rebellion was sure to go down forever. In the plan for the sure fulfillment of this mission there were other considerations to engage the attention of the responsible head, besides, and far reaching beyond, the purpose of winning a single battle.

That this army, which was destined to be regarded by the nation as the wall of adamant for the shielding of the capital, and the military center of the combined operations for the restoration of the Union—that it should be prepared for all the vicissitudes and varied fortunes incident to the great campaigns of history, all the circumstances of the strength and preparation of the enemy most clearly impressed.

With the vast advantages which their defensive attitude afforded, and which numbers were hardly adequate to overcome—with a people as thoroughly united in resistance to our arms as the loyal States of the North in behalf of the Union,—with an army as brave, as fearless and as devoted as any in history—that army commanded by a general of the first order of the military genius of the time, supported by the consummate skill and valor of such lieutenants as Hill and Longstreet and Jackson,—no single defeat could destroy, nor any single disaster appall them.

For the repeated defeat and ultimate destruction of this grand confederate power, amid all the disadvantages incident to campaigns and invasions, all the skill, the valor, the discipline, the energies and the operations of the Army of the Potomac and its commanders must be directed.

To win victories must be the aim—to turn repulse to the account of future battles must evidence its self confidence and its unyielding devotion.

While undergoing the long and laborious process of discipline and preparation for a responsibility so fraught with events and so big with the fate of free institutions, we calculated not, nor could we then conceive, their great importance to our success in the more trying realities of war.

That our army should grow into shape so slowly—that with a proud and defiant enemy in our front we should be kept upon the work of fortfying the capital in lieu of attempting to raise the siege by battle, were circumstances as trying to the patience of the soldiery of that army as to the people of the country. That in the events developed as the scheme of war passed into history, this disciplinary period was sufficiently brief for the purposes in hand, the future historian will never question.

Thus under the national depression attendant upon the late disaster in the Manassas campaign, in the face of a victorious and exultant enemy, the citizens of the North, schooled only in the peaceful arts, many of them never having seen an implement of war nor listened to a martial strain, and with scarcely the nucleus of an organization around which to form, in the brief space of seven months are converted into one of the best ordered and disciplined armies of modern history.

They found the capital of their government naked and defenseless, and the hearts of her chosen rulers failing them from fear. They walled that city round about with vast cordons of defenses, and with an intelligent forecast which providently surveyed the requirements of an expectant people, they did not forget that there was a power to destroy as well as a city to save.

At length the army was in readiness to take the field. The enemy, snuffing the battle from afar, and foreseeing

that the conflicts which should determine the fate of their confederate empire would be inaugurated before the confederate capital, had surrounded it and every avenue of its approach with a network of defenses, and had summoned thither their late *offensive* army for the purpose of *defensive* warfare, and the scene is changed from the camps of discipline on the Potomac to the battle fields of the Peninsula.

And here, on the threshold, as it were, of those Titanic struggles which were almost constantly testing the skill and valor of these confronting armies through the three years that followed, was manifest the inestimable value of discipline bestowed, the worth to the nation of the months devoted to preparation, the self-sustaining confidence infused into the various departments in this their baptismal experience in the realities of war.

To single out a specific field more illustrious for comment than any other, where, with scarcely an interval of repose, the deadly struggle culminated in the classical week of battles, would seem invidious. The enthusiasm and heroic devotion which the men of that army carried into the performance of every duty devolving upon them in that memorable campaign, surpasses all ordinary description.

Recall the willing toil, the nightly march and watch amid the storms violent beyond precedent in that vast morass, the bivouac before the long line of intrenchments, the ceaseless crashing of shot and shell through the arching forests which concealed our advancing parallels before Yorktown, the uncomplaining hands that turned so cheerfully from the rifle to the axe or the spade and back again to the deadly skirmish, the bold assaults through the entangled streams and upon positions of unknown resisting force, the sublime exhibitions of indifference to individual fate, while disease was making

one vast graveyard of that peninsula,—yet no heart falters and no tongue complains.

It was now less than a twelve-month since these citizen soldiers were in the undisturbed avocations of their varied peaceful duties, having no forecast of the great contribution they were to furnish to the historic material of the greatest insurrection of this or any age. It was less than a twelve-month since all were sharing the felicities of their pastoral and metropolitan homes, mingled in the scenes of all the arts and pursuits which adorn and ennoble an enlightened people. Go back through the long catalogue of the chronicles of war, to the first syllable of recorded time, and we look for but do not find a parallel to this.

The cause which had sped them on to this fitting stage of preparation was the cause of free government, and its success the world's last hope of freedom's permanence.

Those men were not unfamiliar with the glorious historic record of their ancestry, nor of the correct interpretation of the constitution and government which had been intrusted to their guardianship. Obedience to that constitution and the preservation of the unity of the multiplied States was the burden of their patriotism and their devotion.

Dissimilar to any of the great armies of the world which had come and gone before them, they "waited not on the smiles of princes nor basked in the noon-tide of royal favor." Their faith was drawn from the inspiration of the oracles of the sagacious Washington, the eloquent Adams, the philosophical Franklin, and the peerless Hamilton, the pole star of whose ambition was to establish, to preserve and to perpetuate, undimmed and undiminished, the rising constellation of states.

As those sages of the revolutionary period had devoted their lives and honor to the foundation and framework of this building, so did these men, their children, devote their lives and honor against the fatal heresy, the mad passion, which now sought to tear the structure down. Ever mindful of the conflicts amid which the Union was born, they stopped not to calculate the cost of its preservation, but earnestly and solemnly devoted themselves to this war's last resort to save their heritage of freedom from dissolution.

Too little has been understood and appreciated by those who were not of them of this ruling spirit which animated that noble body of American soldiers,—their steadfastness for the sovereignty of their cardinal principle, the indissoluble unity of the states, their fealty to that principle through adversity and suffering and in the shadow of death, attested by a faith in its ultimate vindication, as sublime amid reverse as in the hour of triumph—a faith by which they sometimes fought, as in the tangled copse of the wilderness, more than by sight, and which guided and sustained them throughout the varying fortunes of their four years of military life, and until the great object of their devotion was crowned with success and the Union vindicated.

It was that ruling spirit, that intelligent faith in the ultimate vindication of the government for which they fought, that inspired them to the performance of those deeds of soldierly grandeur which have allotted to them their peculiar place, high on the roll of the great historic armies of the world.